WASHINGTON POST 18 MAY 1975

## CIA 'Outshuffled' Post Office, Opened Airmail From China

By George Lardner Jr. Washington Post Staff Writer

incoming airmail from China for weeks at a time despite a concentrated effort by U.S. postal inspectors to prevent the tampering.

Chief U.S. Postal Inspector -scrutiny of envelopes-and: none of the mail was to be opened.

Another top postal official: added that the CIA representative who secured the Postal Service's approval of the project agreed not to tamper with the mail in any way.

Postal inspectors in San Francisco were even assigned to watch the CIA agents watching the mail and make: sure the rules were followed. Cotter told a reporter. But somehow, he said, the CIA operatives managed to intercept! and evidently copy selected with Conway. riest-class letters.

opening of first-class mail: without a search warrant. By the CIA requested, is a longstanding although sometimes investigative controversial technique and does not require a court order. It involves the recording of information on envelopes, such as the names of the senders and the addresses.

The CIA "outshuffled our people on the scene," said James V. P. Conway, executive essistant for postul affairs and formerly Cotter's top deputy. 'I was not only surprised, but disappointed . . . unhappy. Those are the most genteel words I can think of to decribe my reaction."

CIA Director William E. Colby acknowledged the West Coast mail openings in conressional testimony earlier his year, but he gave no hint hat the operation was conducted in violation of explicit conditions laid down by postal. authorities.

surveillance of the CIA agents assigned to the project.

The inspectors "would have

duct a "mail cover" operation Postmaster General Winton can't be delayed." M. Blount. Several months was explicitly warned that later, he said, "a colleague of mine from the other place (the CIA) contacted me and said they'd like to survey some mail between Red China and the West Coast."

> "sensitive" about the proposition because, as a former CIA employee, he already knew of: opening project in New York. which he eventually helped bring to a halt. In any case, he said, he told the CIA to take up the West Coast request:

Conway said he was unacontrast, a "mail cover." which routed from the Far East. see him, showed him a gener techniques. ally worded letter, and asked for permission to examine "the outsides," the envelopes that the CIA hoped to get only, of incoming letters from some insights into the prog-China.

"I said that was all right, but that the mail was not to be opened by them or interfered with," Conway recalled. "I bombs in China, I thought looked the guy right in the maybe they could take a eye and told him that and I said, 'Do you understand?' He said he understood."

Perhaps half a dozen CIA agents. Conway estimated, were assigned to the project, which was carried out at a U.S. postal inspection facility in San Mateo, Calif., near the San Francisco airport.

The project was carried out on four separate occasions. each lasting a week or two, between November, 1969, and October, 1971. Each time, Conway said, two to three postal inspectors were ordered "to stay with them all the time" in

The Central Intelligence Cotter and Conway reported, tions and supply interested out the mail with some sort of Agency surreptitiously opened assounded the postal inspeculaw enforcement agencies instrument. But he said he tors who conducted the special with the information gleaned. was told the CIA wanted to do But Conway said he let the this to find out "whether the

CIA do the work because mail was being tampered with we're talking about a lot of in China" or Hong Kong bebet money that nothing like mail-probably a few hundred fore arrival here. that happened," Conway said. letters a day. One of the in- Following the first week of A former CIA agent, Cotter spectors brought it over in the program, Conway recalled. William J. Cotter said the CIA was named chief postal inspec sacks from the airport . . . I "our people said that they (the was authorized only to contor in April, 1969, by then told them, 'Look, this stuff CIA agents) found quite a few duct a "mail cover" conserved.

Both Cotter and Conway were uncertain just how the CIA opened the mail, but they suspect that the agents tucked away selected letters when postal inspectors weren't looking, copied them at the CIA's offices, and returned them into the mailstream the next day.

"Apparently they had water in "unauthorized" CIA mail- lists" of the mail they wanted to read. Cotter has stated. Conway added that less than 5 per cent of the China mail, which ranged in estimated volume from 1.000 to 2,500 letters a week, was intercepted.

CIA director Colby, who has Federal law prohibits the ware of this. He said he first publicly acknowledged the ilgot a call from the CIA in legality of the mail openings. mid-1969 about how mail was has described the projects as an attempt to discover the Sometime after that, he said, names of people in active coran official from the CIA's co- respondence with China, to devert operations division, whom | velop foreign contacts and to he declined to name, came to check on Chinese censorship

> However, Cotter said he vaguely recalled being told ress of China's nuclear bomb testing program. "It may sound silly." Cotter said, "but if they were exploding A-bombs in China, I thought Geiger counter and run it over the mail and see if there was any radioactivity."

The CIA's admission that Normally, postal officials Conway said the CIA did-mail had been opened; both conduct "mail cover" opera- ask for permission to check

letters that had been tampered with," ostensibly in China Apparently, "the flaps were damaged."

Cotter said the CIA's records on the project, which he inspected recently, that the Postal Service's warnings against opening the mail were not misunderstood. "They admit it in the records," Cotter said. "He [Conway] did admonish them."

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2011/02/22: CIA-RDP90-01208R000100250017-8